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# **‘They’re All Just Little Bits, Aren’t They’: South Australian Lesbian Mothers’ Experiences of Marginalisation in Primary Schools**

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## **Abstract**

Multiple formations of family have always been a part of Australia’s social and historical landscape, yet social norms typically function to marginalise some family forms whilst according to others a privileged status. Marginalisation on the basis of sexuality, for example, whilst arguably somewhat less prevalent than in previous decades, nonetheless continues for those families positioned outside the heteronorm. Institutions such as schools can play an important role in transforming marginalising practices, yet research such as that presented in this paper suggests that schools often also perpetuate marginalisation, even if unintentionally. Drawing on interviews conducted with 23 lesbian mothers, the findings highlight the often subtle ways in which such mothers with children in South Australian primary schools experience marginalisation by educators. Specifically, we argue that marginalisation occurs in the form of injunctions made upon lesbian mothers to inform educators about their families (and to do so in often highly normative ways), to accept that it is their role to manage discrimination, and to treat as routine the marginalisation of their families. Such findings indicate that changes still remain necessary within Australian educational practices in order to ensure the full inclusion of lesbian mother families on terms of their own making.

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## Introduction

As research across a range of fields continues to demonstrate, and despite the fact that the Australian nation as an imagined community [1] prides itself on being an egalitarian society [2] that values giving everyone “a fair go” [3], there are many forms of exclusionary practices that impact on the everyday realities of Australians positioned outside the norm of white middle-class heterosexuality. For those people who do not identify as heterosexual, for example, the “fair go” espoused by politicians and political pundits is still a long way off. While not a homogenous group (as, like the broader community, non-heterosexual communities are shaped by complex relationships of power that vector along lines of class, race, ethnicity and gender), research on non-heterosexual people and their families in Australia continues to reveal shared experiences of exclusion resulting from everyday forms of heteronormativity, along with the dominance of heterosexist practices at various structural levels of society [4].

In terms of the marginalisation of non-heterosexual people and the failure of claims to egalitarianism and a ‘fair go’ to truly function to support all Australians, our focus in this article is on South Australian lesbian mothers’ experiences of marginalisation in the primary school system. Our focus on South Australia arose from the fact that, at the time the data were collected, South Australia was relatively unique in terms of the relationship between the state and lesbian mothers. Historically, South Australia was the first Australian state to remove legal prohibitions against homosexuality, yet 35 years later at the time of data collection it was the last remaining state to provide full legal protection for lesbian mothers and their children. Whilst legislative change has since occurred (bringing the state, at least to some degree, in line with the rest of Australia), it still lags behind in terms of full recognition of lesbian mothers (with the new legislation only recognising both mothers – in the case of couples – on the birth certificate if the child was conceived through a reproductive health clinic, and if the mothers had been in a relationship for a period of at least three years at the time when the child was born). As such, whilst the research reported here builds on previous Australian research on lesbian mother families and educational systems that has been conducted in the Eastern states

(summarised below), it also contributes new information to this field by presenting the voices of South Australian mothers

The findings presented below draw upon interviews conducted with 23 lesbian mothers, who between them were parenting a total of 57 school or kindergarten aged children. As we argue, the data demonstrate various injunctions made upon lesbian mothers to respond to the marginalisation of their families in ways that implicitly treat their families as the problem (rather than social norms being treated as the cause of marginalisation).

Furthermore, we suggest that while lesbian mother families may at times be able to claim a space for their families within educational contexts, the terms upon which this happens are often constraining and not of their choosing, and any resistance may threaten to position their families at 'not acceptable'. These challenges faced by lesbian mother families stand in contrast to the often relatively straightforward inclusion accorded to heterosexual families (and particularly those in nuclear families headed by white middle-class married couples), where the assumption is that such families are the standard to which all other families should be measured. Before presenting our findings, however, we first provide a brief overview of previous research on the educational experiences of lesbian mother families, both within Australia and abroad.

## **Literature Review**

There are a number of useful observations that can be drawn from the existing body of literature on lesbian mothers and their children. Firstly, empirical evidence strongly indicates that children of lesbian-parented families fare as well as, if not better than, children of heterosexual parents when it comes to educational outcomes. Gatrell and Bos [5], for example, reporting on their twenty year longitudinal study of 78 children – now adults – note that the children of lesbian mothers in their sample had significantly higher levels of academic/educational competence compared to children from a matched sample of children with heterosexual parents. This is not to suggest that children in the first group are superior to children from the latter group *per se*, but rather to challenge the homophobic and heterosexist view that children need to be raised by heterosexual parents

in order to succeed in life, including academically (findings supported by other longitudinal research, such as that conducted by Tasker and Golombok [6]). Yet alongside this rapidly growing body of research demonstrating the positive educational outcomes for children raised by lesbian mothers (amongst other positive outcomes), there is ample evidence to suggest that both lesbian mothers and their children experience discrimination in schools, including verbal and/or physical abuse, exclusion from representation in classrooms, and requests *not* to be ‘out’ [7, 8]. Additionally, Lindsay et al’s [9] Victorian research suggests other forms of marginalisation experienced by lesbian mothers and their children, such as the differential treatment of birth and non-birth mothers, the requirement that lesbian mothers educate teachers in order to ensure their inclusion, and the repeated requirement *to* come out. Yet in the face of this requirement, their participants reported a range of social forces that inhibited their choices to disclose their family structure, such as due to fears of being stigmatised, and a limitation on the ways in which they could find acceptance when they did disclose, such as having to be measured against heterosexual families (also see Lee and Duncan [10]). Some of their participants reported an expectation to be ‘perfect parents’, an injunction that we argue is another manifestation of heterosexism, and one that is no less oppressive than more overt forms of discrimination (also see Rawthorne [11]). In response to the forms of marginalisation and discrimination outlined above, research [12-14] suggests that lesbian mothers are often forced to take measures to protect their families as best they can within the school environment. Such measures include lesbian mothers having a high level of involvement in their children’s schools; gauging teachers early on to assess their capacity for inclusivity; and by following recommendations from other parents about inclusive schools. Yet despite these steps, success is not guaranteed, and as Skatterbol and Ferfolja suggest, managing discriminatory educational contexts places a daily strain upon lesbian mothers and their families [14].

## **Method**

Our own study aimed to build upon the above insights, by focusing on the educational experiences of South Australian lesbian mother families, a population whom to date have

received little attention by researchers (the work of Ripper [15] being a notable exception). Following ethics approval from the first author's institution, the approach to data collection was two-fold: an online survey (reported elsewhere [16]) and an interview study reported here. Interviews were conducted with the 23 lesbian mothers who completed the online survey. All but one of the mothers self-identified as white Australian. Four of the participants identified as single mothers and the remaining were partnered. Participants indicated their age in response to pre-determined categories, with 1 identifying within the range 18-25, 4 within the range 26-30, 3 within the range 31-35, 11 within the range 36-40, and 2 in both age ranges 41-45 and 46-50.

Interviews typically lasted one hour, and focused on topics such as "What have been your experiences of supportive strategies put in place by your child's school", "What does it mean to you when your family is not included within school spaces", and "What does it mean to be a lesbian mother with school-aged children". All interviews were transcribed verbatim, with pseudonyms assigned to each participant.

Following transcription, the entire dataset was read and re-read by the first author, utilising both the previous research outlined above as a heuristic for identifying common themes, and with attention also paid to other themes not previously identified. This process identified five themes that predominated across almost all of the interviews.

Three of these echo previous research, namely 1) the expectation that lesbian mothers must 'educate the educator', 2), the requirement to repeatedly come out to other people, and 3) inadequate responses by educators to discrimination. Two additional themes were identified that were unique to the present research: 1) the sexualisation of lesbian mother families, and 2) the apparently 'wilful forgetting' of lesbian mothers' names by other adults.

These five themes are now explored in close detail, with a focus on the particular rhetorical devices either reported by or deployed by lesbian mothers. In other words, our focus is on the micro detail of how marginalisation occurs and how it is accounted for, an approach that echoes previous discursive research on heteronormativity [17]. As such, we treat the existence of discrimination towards lesbian mothers and their families as a taken for granted fact, and are here interested in the specificities of how it occurs, and especially its often mundane, everyday, forms. Importantly, we also focus on the routine

ways in which some of the participants appeared to minimise or explain away marginalisation. Our intent in doing so is not to further stigmatise the participants, but rather to highlight how, when marginalisation is experienced as the warp and weft of everyday life for some people, it may at times become so axiomatic as to be almost invisible. In highlighting some of the rhetorical devices deployed by the participants, then, our intention is to highlight the insidious ways in which daily marginalisation can become a taken-for-granted part of life for some lesbian mothers, a fact that is of considerable concern to us as researchers. Further, our focus on the rhetoric of educators as reported by participants is not to make a mountain out of a molehill (i.e., very few of the mothers reported explicit discrimination from educators). Rather, our interest is to examine how, despite the rhetoric of inclusivity, some South Australian educators nonetheless fail to create a safe space for some lesbian mothers.

## **Findings**

The findings reported below highlight what we refer to as the ‘injunctions’ placed upon the lesbian mothers in our sample by some South Australian educators. This notion of ‘injunctions’ is, we think, helpful for understanding the subtle ways in which marginalisation occurs. An injunction, by definition, is a command placed upon a person to do something (or in the case of the law, to *not* do something). In terms of lesbian mothers, injunctions function to place expectations upon them that are both not of their making, and unreasonable given the context (in which lesbian mothers do not create heteronormativity, yet they face an injunction to both live with it and manage it). Whilst the injunctions we explore (amongst other rhetorical devices) are often implicit or seemingly minor, we take to heart the suggestion of the one participant whose words begin the title of this paper, namely that it is often the ‘little bits’ of discrimination that constrain and oppress lesbian mothers in their daily lives within educational contexts. In taking these ‘little bits’ as our focus, we highlight the mundane (though no less marginalising) effects of regulatory norms as they circulate within school spaces, and the strategies lesbian mothers employ to negotiate spaces that are at times unsafe.

## *Educating the Educator*

The first theme presented here highlights the subtle ways in which heteronormativity produces an injunction upon lesbian mothers to ‘educate the educator’ in order to attempt to ensure the inclusion of their family. As Kitzinger [18] argues in regards to lesbian women in general (and as Riggs [19] has indicated in research on Australian lesbian and gay foster carers specifically), the expectation “that ‘we’ teach ‘them’ about our oppression may constitute one form of that oppression” (p. 130). In terms of our interest in the rhetorical devices deployed by both educators and lesbian mothers to respectively enact or manage heteronormativity, it was notable that whilst all of the mothers interviewed were aware that they were managing the potential effects of heteronormativity by ‘educating the educator’, in most instances they nonetheless treated this as routine, almost to the point where at times it appeared outside their awareness that they were doing so. This can be seen in the following extract, where the participant not only treats making approaches to educators to assess their inclusivity or provide them with information as routine, but where this routiness is treated as taken-for-granted:

Violet: “we obviously went up to the teacher - which I have actually done every year since - and I just said “this is our parental situation”. I did that the first year and then the next year and so on”.

Here the word ‘obvious’ is of interest, as it treats as axiomatic the fact that the mother *should* have to go up to the teacher. That she then feels compelled to do this again and again highlights not simply the subtle and ongoing ways in which heteronormativity functions (i.e., in feeling required to repeat her performance of the subject position ‘lesbian mother’, a point we return to in the next theme), but also the taken-for-grantedness of this compulsion. Importantly, our point here is not that lesbian mothers such as the participant reported above are dupes of heteronormativity, but rather that, when normative injunctions are part of the everyday lives of lesbian mothers, they perhaps understandably become routine.



Echoing previous research on lesbian mothers, some of the instances where participants spoke about ‘educating the educator’ also evoked the rhetoric of liberal inclusivity to warrant the visibility of lesbian mother families to educators. For instance, in the following two extracts, the fact that the women claim their lesbianism to be ‘no big deal’ belies the fact that such a disclaimer precisely demonstrates what is at stake in making such a claim:

Prue: “I always make a point of having an interview with the teacher at the beginning of the year and say ‘you know it’s no big deal, we’re not coming in here with a big flag’. Just to say ‘hey, just to fill you in, heads up’”.

Here again the participant appears to accept the injunction that it is her responsibility to give a ‘heads up’, and perhaps most concerning, that such a heads up cannot be accompanied by a ‘big flag’ – that lesbian mothers must enter into a discourse of being ‘just like’ any other parent in order for their family to be accepted. This injunction is one that we would suggest produces a paradox for lesbian mothers, one where on the one hand they must be upfront and declarative about their sexuality in order to attempt to stave off marginalisation, but at the same time their declaration must be rendered in such a way that it is not seen as ‘too much’ (i.e., having a big flag). This paradox is made even clearer in the following extract:

Fatima: “From the very beginning both of us have been very visible and we’re illuminating that whole, you know, once you’ve got the information it takes away the fear that people have, that misconception. A lot of people have no idea growing up of being gay or anything really, and so that sort of wipes it away. It’s not an issue and often, even recently, some of the kids we’ve known for years have either seen Mardi Gras on TV or something, commented on it and the parents have gone ‘you know [Mum and Mum]’ yeah ok. It’s not a big deal”.

Here the participant clearly states that her and her partner are ‘very visible’, yet that visibility is only of a certain kind: they are not the ‘Mardi Gras’ kind of lesbian women,

but rather they are the kinds of lesbian women who ‘wipe away’ fear and make misconceptions ‘not a big deal’. Whilst obviously this type of approach may serve some lesbian mothers well (in that dispelling misconceptions may often be a cornerstone in preventing marginalisation), at the same time we would question why it is the role of lesbian mothers to dispel fear, and why that requires lesbian mothers to enact a particularly normative version of lesbian motherhood. We obviously recognise that some lesbian mothers may very well wish to adopt an identity that is ‘just like’ that of any (nominally heterosexual) mother – the desire to be ‘just like’ is the hallmark of a liberal democracy from which lesbian mothers are not especially exempt [20]. Our point here, however, is as to whether, when faced with the injunction to ‘educate the educator’ (and thus legitimate their own inclusion), lesbian mothers can truly choose how they self-present, or whether that is largely chosen for them by the heteronormative social context. Thus as Lindsay et al state; even while “some families may want to adopt a proud strategy with active disclosure...[schools are often] unwilling to credit their lesbian family identities” (p 1071). This shoe horning of lesbian family identities into a one-size model was evident in the last extract presented in this theme:

Lucy: “I think there was one teacher who struggled to start with, and I said to [our son] ‘She’s learning and maybe we are the first family she’s met and it’s part of our image to show that nothing’s different’. And so over a period of time we show that it’s ok and not to be any different”.

This extract is notable for the fact that the participant reports not only instructing her son to accept that educating the educator is just a part of life, but that this must be accompanied by not being any different. Victoria Clarke [21-23] and Stephen Hick’s [24, 25] extensive work on lesbian and gay parents in the UK has repeatedly highlighted that this expectation to be ‘no different’ has multiple effects that only serve to reproduce the heteronorm, such as treating heterosexual families as the norm to which lesbian mother families should aspire, treating difference as a negative attribute, and thus both minimising some of the challenges that lesbian mothers and their children face living in a

heteronormative and homophobic society, and ignoring the positives that may come from living in a lesbian mother family (as summarised earlier).

As this theme would suggest, the injunctions placed upon lesbian mother families by the very fact of living in a heteronormative and homophobic society means that some mothers (including many of those in our sample) treat as taken-for-granted the expectation that they 'educate the educator'. Further, for those who take up this expectation, this appeared to often be accompanied by the expectation that they would perform a very specific version of lesbian mother identity, one that is 'no big deal' and 'not any different'. Whilst the work of Clarke and Hicks has insightfully pointed out that lesbian mothers are no more outside social norms that circulate within liberal democracies than are other parents, the analysis provided above would suggest that, given the injunctions placed upon lesbian mothers (that are highly regulated by their desire to support their children and ensure an inclusive education for them), there may, at least for some mothers, be little choice but to reaffirm the very norms that threaten them with marginalisation in the first place.

### ***Repeatedly Having to Come Out***

This second theme reinforces the findings of previous research on lesbian mothers [26], which suggests that many lesbian mothers experience an injunction to repeatedly have to come out. This is due to the heteronormative assumption that the category 'mother' equates to 'heterosexual mother', resulting in lesbian mothers either accepting misreadings of themselves as heterosexual mothers, or having to repeatedly find ways to evoke the label 'lesbian' [27]. This illustrates a point made by Judith Butler [28], namely that coming out is never truly done, as those located outside the heteronorm will experience ongoing injunctions to disclose their sexuality (or alternately, to hide it). Of course this injunction puts non-heterosexual people in a bind, given the fact that those who oppose the rights and lives of non-heterosexual people often claim that 'sexuality should be a private matter'. Having to frequently disclose one's sexuality, even if that is the product of a heteronormative social context, thus positions those who disclose as

‘saying too much’. For many of the lesbian mothers in our sample, this injunction to repeatedly come out was experienced negatively:

Pam: “I’m the main one that goes to the school, and whilst they were pretty good for the first year, it was like coming out every single day to a different parent which drove me insane”.

Whilst the participant’s reference to being driven insane by having to repeatedly come out was passed off in the interview as a joke, we treat this claim seriously. An extensive body of research evidence now exists which highlights the significant negative mental health effects of social stigma and marginalisation upon non-heterosexual people [29]. Yet what has been given somewhat less attention are the cumulative effects of low-level discrimination upon non-heterosexual people. Obviously our point here is not that our participant was ‘insane’, but rather that it can often be the subtle, everyday instances of heteronormativity that produce significant levels of stress in the lives of non-heterosexual people. Part of the reason why such everyday instances of heteronormativity may be experienced as stressful, we would suggest, is because the expectation is placed upon non-heterosexual people to do the work of coming out (rather than heterosexual people having to challenge heteronormativity), as the following participant indicates:

Marg: “I mean I’m sure many people you’ve talked to have said this, but it’s just the constant outness, I mean, I’m coaching [our son] in sport. [My partner] comes along but it just hasn’t come up with the rest of the team mummies that she is my partner. It’s one of those situations where you don’t have an obvious opportunity to come out”.

This extract highlights how the injunction is placed upon lesbian mothers to always disclose their sexuality. As the participant reports, there are cues available for her family to be read as a two-mother family (i.e., that both mothers go to the sports games), yet it is repeatedly the participant who has to find ‘obvious opportunities to come out’, rather than her being able to expect that other parents should be able to read her family correctly. Again, as we suggested above, this type of low-level stress can have negative

consequences for lesbian mothers, with previous research indicating that the ‘misreading’ of lesbian couples as sisters, mother and daughter, or ‘just friends’ serves to greatly minimise the significance of the relationship [30].

### ***Willfull Forgetting***

This third theme echoes aspects of the first and second themes, in that it highlights some of the more subtle (though no less detrimental) forms of heteronormativity faced by the participants in our sample. This theme – which we have entitled ‘willful forgetting’ – references the fact that many of the mothers reported that other adults, whom they regularly encountered at their children’s schools, repeatedly claimed that they could not remember the mothers’ names. Whilst it could be argued that there is nothing willful in such forgetting, we would argue contrarily that, much like the racist rhetoric in which all people racialised as non-white are treated by many dominant group members as all looking ‘all the same’[31], the claim to not be able to discern between two women in a relationship is guided by the seeing of marginal group members as the category they inhabit, rather than as individuals. In other words, whilst there may be no explicit ill-will sitting behind the forgetting of two mothers’ names, such forgetting is, nonetheless, shaped by a heteronormative social context which sees lesbian mothers *solely as ‘lesbians’*, and not also as individual people with unique characteristics, and that this is part and parcel of the failure to properly recognise lesbians across many sectors of Australian society. As the participant below notes, and as was true for most of the women interviewed who were in couple relationships (who constituted the majority of the sample), lesbian women in couple relationships rarely look so alike as to be so hard to distinguish between:

Louise: “Teachers at the old school were always confusing us, saying stuff like “I can’t remember, I can’t tell you apart”...I mean we don’t look anything alike!”

Again here we can see an injunction placed upon lesbian women, in the statement ‘I can’t tell you apart’. Whilst on the surface the speaker in this instance notionally holds

themselves accountable for not remembering or discerning, at the same time, when this type of behaviour occurs repeatedly, as it did for many of the participants, it is important to question why the person – in this instance a teacher – doesn't develop some form of heuristic for remembering which mother is which. Again, we would suggest that failing to find ways to discern the two women in a lesbian mother family is shaped by the viewing of the mothers solely as lesbians, and not as individual women. Interestingly, and as the following participant notes, some of the participants questioned the rhetoric of 'forgetting', and instead suggested there was something more troublesome at work in claims to forgetting, as we have suggested above:

Jacqui: "It is weird, the kids can normally remember after asking a few times "which one are you", but some of the parents still do it after more than a year. It's almost like they don't want to remember, or like they are trying to draw our attention to something. I mean yes, we do know we are two women!"

As this participant notes, children at the school her child attends typically find ways to remember which mother is which, yet some parents persist in 'forgetting' for considerable periods of time. As Celia Kitzinger [32] (p 126) has suggested, "ignorance is something in which many people have vested interests, and consequently take care to maintain". This, we have suggested here, may be directly applicable to the 'forgetting' of lesbian mothers' names, as it would appear to serve some purpose for those who claim to forget. As we have suggested above, at least part of the explanation for this may be that lesbian mothers are seen solely by the homogenous descriptor 'lesbian'. Possible also may be the fact that some people actively do not want to see lesbian mothers (or lesbian women at all), and thus their forgetting is indeed wilful.

### ***The (De)Sexualisation of Lesbian Mothers***

Unlike the first three themes, which we have suggested are, at least to some degree, relatively implicit or mundane in their enactment of heteronormativity, this fourth theme (along with the one that follows) is much more explicit in its marginalisation of lesbian

mothers and their children. In the present theme, some of the mothers reported experiencing what Ray and Gregory [8] refer to as ‘morbid curiosity’ - borrowing the term from Goffman [33] – about lesbian mothers, usually through inquisitive processes that acted to sexualise and categorise (and thus dehumanise), their status as individuals. This can clearly be seen in the following extract:

Jane: “When we finally found out about the bullying we were horrified at what they were saying. Stuff like “what do your mums do in the shower, how do they do it” and so then I had to come out and talk about the whole how babies are made and born. I knew it was always coming but it was about three years too early for me”.

This extract, perhaps one of the most distressing reported during any of the interviews, highlights the insidious ways in which homophobia impacts upon lesbian mother families. Here the participant’s children were subjected to bullying and victimisation about their mothers’ sexuality, with taunts that sexualised their mothers in ways that forced the mothers to talk with their children about topics they would not otherwise have discussed. This extract highlights how homophobia (and similarly heteronormativity) is highly detrimental to lesbian mother families. The following extract, whilst slightly more subtle, nonetheless highlights the powerful effects of the marginalising ways in which lesbian sexuality is viewed by some educators:

Janine: Last year at school I was asked by the teacher to come along and speak with my son’s class about our family, as part of a unit on families. Within minutes of me being there at least three children asked me how we made a baby given there was no daddy. I began to explain to them the process in exactly the same terms that I use with my own children, which was entirely age appropriate, but the teacher very quickly shut the topic down. When I asked her afterwards why she did that, she said that she didn’t think the children should be hearing about sex”.

This extract, whilst the polar opposite of the previous extract (in that it, at least explicitly, desexualises rather than sexualises lesbian mothers), nonetheless draws on a very similar

narrative to that in the previous extract, namely that lesbian mothers are culpable for their sexual orientation, to the point where anything about them is made out to be sexualised. As the participant notes, she was both invited to speak to the class, and she spoke to the students in age appropriate ways, yet the teacher treated her speech as sexualised, rather than simply as a description of conception. The extract is particularly troubling for the fact that, in essence, it leaves no space for public narratives about the conception of lesbian mother families: on the one hand, it denies the representation of lesbian family formation, but on the other it treats even the barest mention as sexualised.

As Riggs [34] has written about elsewhere, the constructions of lesbian mothers such as those reported in this theme leave no space for the recognition of lesbian sexuality or lesbian family formation. When children are taught the ‘birds and the bees’, what they are being taught, in essence, are the operations of heterosex. And of course when this is taught by heterosexual teachers or heterosexual parents, there is an implicit reference to such adults as nominally engaged in heterosex at some point. This is treated as routine and acceptable (as it should be). Yet when lesbian mothers seek to talk - typically in the most innocuous and sanitised ways - about their family formation, they are often silenced (as per the second extract above), or their sexuality is made to be abhorrent or deviant (as per the first extract above). This pairing of sexualisation and desexualisation functions to deny any representation of lesbian mothers as sexual beings, or as individuals in loving caring relationships in which children are conceived [35].

### ***Responses to Discrimination***

This final theme was constituted by the instances where lesbian mothers spoke about schools’ responses to discrimination faced by their children. For some of the mothers, whilst the school responded positively to the mothers and their children in terms of affirming their support for the family, in practice this often failed to transfer into adequate school-wide responses, as the following two extracts highlight:

Sarah: “nothing was said to the rest of the class, which was sort of the issue as they were just clueless and I think that is where the bullying came from”.



Shannon: The deputy made a point at one of the assemblies so to speak, just sort of reinforced the message you know that bullying isn't appropriate...it wasn't direct, it was generic".

We are of course mindful of the difficult position that educators are placed in when attempting to challenge discrimination after the event. If the educators reported above had made explicit mention of 'teasing on the basis of sexuality', then this could quite likely have singled out the children for further harassment, or at least contributed to their marginalisation. Yet this does not mean that other responses are not possible. Had these all-of-class or all-of-school generic comments been accompanied some time later by units designed to focus on family diversity (for example), this might have made a positive contribution to raising awareness about, and increasing representation of, lesbian mother families in the schools. And of course if the schools, who as the first theme would indicate, had been amply prepared by the mothers for their involvement in the school, had ensured that their curricula and inclusion programmes had actively targeted issues of family diversity, then such proactive approaches may have reduced instances of discrimination in the first place (for more on this see Sears and Williams [36]). Furthermore, and as the following extract indicates, opportunities were available for some educators to challenge discrimination, yet these were dismissed out of hand when suggested by participants:

Angela: "The principal was pretty dismissive when I told her that [my daughter] had heard kids saying "that's so gay". She said, "Oh they don't really mean it in a bad way when they say it", and I went, "Well when [my daughter] is hearing that and concealing aspects of her family structure and identity as a result of hearing that so it *is* a problem, and when I can't fix the problem and she turns from me it is an even bigger issue". So she said, "well you wouldn't be able to do anything without getting parental permission cause you know it's the same as sex ed and when we have any special religious stuff". And I slowly nodded and walked away and thought "that's bullshit" cause they *do* do special religious stuff, like ladies from the local church

come around and talk about Easter every year without parental consent, and it's not sex ed. They're all just, they're all just little bits aren't they".

Echoing the previous theme, here the notion that a principal could challenge discriminatory comments is dismissed through recourse to the notion that talking about lesbianism is 'sexualising' (i.e., it is akin to talking about sex education). Much like the second extract in the previous theme, this type of sexualisation of lesbian mothers represents a very insidious form of marginalisation, one that utilises the rhetoric of 'respect for others' to warrant failing to act. This extract, and the following two, also highlight the deleterious effects of discrimination upon lesbian mother families, where discrimination forces a wedge between mothers and children:

Annabelle: "My daughter felt she couldn't really discuss it with me, because she didn't want me to be upset by this".

Svetlana: "It was hard because we are normally so close, but apparently it had been going on for months and we hadn't heard. We had noticed that he seemed off but couldn't find out why. Even his brother didn't know. When he eventually told me he said he didn't want to talk about 'that word' [i.e. 'lesbian'], which was hard for us".

In these two extracts participants spoke of only finding out through others or by accident that their children were experiencing discrimination. This was problematic not simply for the fact that it potentially placed a wedge between the mothers and their children, but also because it meant that the children potentially had no one to speak to about the discrimination they were facing.

## **Conclusion**

As the findings presented above would suggest, there were many 'little bits' of marginalisation faced by the mothers in our sample. Importantly, our findings emphasise the fact that these are not 'just' little bits at all. Rather, and as enactments of the broader

heteronormative social context in which lesbian mothers and their families live, these ‘little bits’ were quite significant. Most clearly, our findings suggest that there were injunctions placed upon lesbian mothers to accept 1) as routine their own marginalisation, 2) that it is their role to attempt to prevent marginalisation, and 3) that there is no place for representations of their sexuality or identity in any way other than liberal inclusivity via the discourse of being ‘just like’ heterosexual parents. These injunctions, we have suggested, should not be treated as banal or insignificant, even if that is how they were passed off by both some of our participants and some of the educators they engaged with. Rather, the injunction that lesbian mothers must take responsibility for their own marginalisation is a particularly insidious form of normativity that can only contribute to the already significant social stressors faced by lesbian mothers and their children. In presenting these findings, we do not of course mean to suggest that Australia as a nation is exceptional in the uneven power dynamics and marginalising practices experienced by the lesbian mothers in our sample. Nonetheless, we do wish to highlight how their experiences contradict notions of fairness and egalitarianism. In addition, while employing terms such as fairness and egalitarianism, we do not aim to promote assimilation models based on white heteropatriarchal fantasies [37] of containing differences within normative notions of families and nation. Our intent is thus not to invest in discourses of equality that mask attempts to only legitimise non-heterosexual parenting in ways that reproduce the heteronormative nuclear family. Rather, our call is to recognise the fact that some of the spaces in which lesbian mothers and their children should expect to feel included and safe (i.e., schools) can often be spaces experienced as unsafe and marginalising.

What is called for, then, are responses from educators and schools that address the implicit and subtle effects of heteronormativity. Such responses are justified, given the fact that Australia has in place a national safe schools framework, which takes as its overarching vision the belief that ‘All Australian schools are safe and supportive environments’. To truly achieve this for lesbian mothers families, practices must be put in place that proactively ensure the safety and support for such families. This may include, as mentioned earlier, the active inclusion of educational units aimed to truly represent family diversity, and that lesbian sexuality (amongst other forms) is clearly and positively

represented in school sex education programmes. School libraries should aim to ensure that reading material includes a sample of books featuring non-heterosexual families. Schools may also seek to foster gay/straight alliance programmes, which aim to support same-sex attracted young people. Schools must ensure that all educators are capable of providing culturally-competent education to all students, including students whose families are not part of the heterosexual majority. Also, there is a pressing need to closely monitor language use in schools, here with particular reference to the pejorative use of terms such as ‘that’s so gay’. And of course schools must have clearly elaborated anti-bullying policies that provide clear responses to homophobia. Recognising the importance of implementing these recommendations requires that educators refuse to place the injunction upon lesbian mothers and their children to cope with heteronormativity, and to instead take an injunction upon themselves, both to *stop* any forms of marginalisation, and to act in ways that actively promote the inclusion of lesbian mother families.

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